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THE CASE FOR NUCLEAR WAR
ABOLISH SOCIAL SECURITY
CANCEL THE NATIONAL DEBT

The Washington Monthly

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"10 YEARS OLD AND STILL OUTRAGEOUS"

Dept. of Evaluation

Magazine Watches Government Closely

By Garrett Epps
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Charlie Peters' lair—a jumbled warren of offices on the 12th floor of the LaSalle Building in downtown Washington—is an unlikely site for a vital federal agency.

Books and papers fill every available horizontal space. Specks of dust dance in what sunlight manages to find its way through the sooty windows. Much of the office furniture would make even the GSA wince.

Visitors sense immediately that they have penetrated the headquarters of one of Washington's true eccentrics, and neither Peters nor those around him would disagree. But they would insist that these offices are something more —"the government's department of evaluation," as one employe puts it.

The government, of course, has not yet recognized Peters as its inspector general. But that technicality has not stopped him from offering, inside the pages of a small, gray journal called the Washington Monthly, comprehensive pronouncements on subjects ranging from the spoils system [bring it back, he says] to illegal aliens [invite them in] to health care [draft all doctors and set their salaries the way we do for "other life-protecting services — the military, the fire department and the police."]

Peters was 42 when he abandoned a career as a lawyer and bureaucrat for the attractions of magazine publishing. Since then, many better-funded, better-read periodicals have come and gone, but the Washington Monthly, with its current issue, has survived a full if precarious decade.

Tonight, 130 of the Monthly's friends and alumni will gather at the Bread Oven Restaurant near Dupont Circle to celebrate that improbable birthday — and, of course, the man responsible.

They will also be celebrating what has come to be known as Peters' "Gospel," the ever-shifting mass of belief that has achieved a delightful consistency in his mind, if nowhere else. It is a political philosophy composed out of his diverse experience as draftee, lawyer, husband, amateur theatrical director, small businessman and editor. Its salient points include—but are far from limited to —this:

America needs a strong national defense, primarily missile-firing submarines. Most of what lawyers do is either useless or harmful. Doctors are overpaid and should work for the government. Civil servants are also overpaid; half the jobs in the federal government should be presidentially appointed.

Coal miners and garbage collectors do boring, dangerous work and should be well-paid; most other unions are greedy featherbeders. The government should call in all the $1,000 bills. Price controls and gas rationing should be imposed at once; they worked in World War II and they will work again.

Some say the magazine has been a forerunner of the now-influential neoconservative movement. Others consider it a last remnant of the dashing liberalism of the John F. Kennedy era.

Whichever political prism they use, Monthly readers are regularly amused, stimulated and appalled by headlines like ABOLISH SOCIAL SECURITY/ CANCEL THE NATIONAL DEBT, THE CASE FOR NUCLEAR WAR, THE CASE AGAINST DAY CARE, DID FORD COMMIT PERJURY? and NUCLEAR HIJACKING: NOW WITHIN THE GRASP OF ANY BRIGHT LUNATIC.

Despite its small circulation of about 22,000 the Monthly is closely read by many in the upper circles of government, journalism and the academic world — including President Jimmy Carter.

It has printed articles that, for analytical insight and detailed reporting, outclass those produced by news [illegible]

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It has also printed articles that some regard as masterpieces of muddled thinking and inaccurate reporting.

And it has managed to turn the dullest of fields, bureaucracy, into an absorbing morality play or romance—a tapestry of ambition, integrity, temptation and redemption.

Peters is a small man with deep-set eyes and a high-pitched musical voice who, after a stint in the West Virginia legislature, served under President Kennedy and Johnson as a program evaluator for the Peace Corps.

Peters says that experience—and a realization that other government programs were not being evaluated systematically—led him to start the magazine.

In leaving the secure, salaried ranks of the federal bureaucracy to become an entrepreneur, Peters was following a major tenet of his gospel. "I have become genuinely frightened," he says, "at the lack of entrepreneurial spirit in the large organizations—the lack of a driving concern with the product, whether it be a car or a delivered social service.

"The key to life is a lack of fear of failure," he says. "That doesn't mean you have to convince yourself that you're great—it just means you have to get over being afraid of falling on your face."

Those who know Peters agree that this is a fear he has mastered completely. "The great theme of the gospel," says former Monthly staffer Michael Kinsley, now managing editor of the New Republic, "is that people should take risks and express themselves and not opt for security . . . that everybody should live like Charlie Peters."

Innovator in Bluffing

Because the Monthly has stood on the brink of bankruptcy most of its life, Peters has become an innovator in the art of bluffing creditors. David Ignatius, now a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, calls his ex-boss "a master of confrontation bargaining. He would say what he was willing to pay, and they would keep saying it was outrageous—but they settled."

One abortive scheme Ignatius recalls, involved increasing available cash by paying bills with unsigned checks, thus producing a delay while the creditors sent them back.

Peters threw a fit once when he found out that a new business manager had actually paid all the bills in full. "I've never seen him so angry," recalls copy editor Maralee Schwartz. "I thought he was going to take a bat and hit someone."

Many staffers can remember occasions when their pay checks came late, and the Monthly's free-lance writers have become accustomed to waiting months to be paid.

One outraged writer, Tom Mechling, hauled Peters into small claims court last year and forced him to pay $83 for an article he had submitted that the magazine did not use. Another, Lester Jackson, has had a plagiarism suit against the magazine pending for eight years, charging that a Monthly editor lifted an idea from a manuscript he submitted.

Slightly in the Black

Today, Peters says, the magazine is slightly in the black—though it has taken $500,000 to get it there. Most of that money has been raised from a few key investors—West Virginia Governor John D. Rockefeller IV, toy heir Louis Marx Jr., financier Warren Buffet, Singer sewing machine heir Alfred Clark and New Haven businessman Joseph Crowley.

Peters has managed to keep control of the magazine, however, by using a complex corporate system that trades present voting control for rights to future profits—if any.

Peters has made sacrifices to keep the magazine afloat, he says. "I live poorly compared with my peers. A lot of my friends who are 52 years old are paid $200,000—I'm paid $20,000. But I don't feel any great sense of sacrifice. I buy a cheaper brand of wine. My wife and I take a trip every seven years instead of every year. Our house is a very nice house—it's small. . . . I truly don't feel any sense of tremendous loss. I think it's harder on your family."

Despite his reverence for the entrepreneurial ideal, it is as an editor, not a businessman, that Peters is most respected. He charms, intimidates and outrages his young disciples—and goads them to do work better than they thought possible.

"He's the most valuable editor I've ever worked with," says James Fallows, who went from writing articles for the Monthly to writing speeches for President Carter, and who is now Washington editor of the Atlantic Magazine.

"He never stops pushing you to get out of the rut of ordinary thinking. Before I came to the Monthly, I had gotten used to saying, 'What is the quickest solution that came to mind?' Charlie taught me not to accept that, but to look for the third or fourth or fifth answer."

Marathon of Rewriting

Former staffer Nicholas Lemann recalls completing one article—involving 2½ rewrites—before going to visit friends in New York. Sunday morning he got a long distance call: Peters wanted another rewrite of the end. Lemann obliged while his hostess seethed, then phoned the new wording to Washington. Late that night came another call: Peters was still not satisfied.

"At this point it was like that scene in 1984 where they ask him how much is two and two," Lemann says. He did another rewrite on a morning train to Washington, then went to a nearby cafeteria for lunch. He had not eaten breakfast.

There was a long line at the cafeteria, Lemann recalls, and he had just gotten his tray when "a little voice in my ear said, 'Well, we'd better get back on it, Nick.' " It was Peters, who led his captive back to the office for a final try. "It took me a week to get to speak normally to Charlie again," says Lemann. "But he's usually right, and that's what kills you."

Says Ignatius, "Charlie takes liberties with people that only a genuine genius or an artist is allowed to take. He's been so successful that he must be a genius."

The result of Peters' persistence can be journalism with a kind of magisterial reach, a boldness of imagination that can synthesize large amounts of information and offer new insights drawn from unexpected sources or even from thin air.

But because he often fails to push for details or accuracy, the Monthly has printed articles that were seriously under-researched, undersourced and tendentious, critics and some friends agree.

Peters has also committed notorious errors of tone and taste. Fallows cites, with regret, one article he and Peters cowrote on how to improve volunteer action programs, which Peters chose to title "How to Stop Masturbating."

Monthly writers quickly grow accustomed to Peters' practice of spooning liberal heaps of his gospel into their articles, but there are occasional protests.

David Ignatius recalls one book review that had been stretched to include unrelated digressions on what was wrong with the Civil Aeronautics Board, doctors, lawyers, the House impeachment hearings and the Army. Then Peters suggested a brief plea for a guaranteed annual income. "Oh well," he said when Ignatius objected, "as long as they've read this far, why not give them the whole thing?"

Topics at Dizzying Speed

The Monthly has had some limited success as an investigative journal—most notably a 1970 expose by Army Capt. Christopher Pyle that first revealed military spying on civilians, and subsequent stories by free-lance writer Timothy Ingram on the dangers of liquefied natural gas and nuclear hijacking.

But the magazine is far more known for its distinctive brand of opinion writing, which blends fact and theory and skips from topic to topic with dizzying speed to make a statement about things—or, less often, right—with American society and government.

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Peters' obsessive concern with reforming the federal bureaucracy struck a sympathetic chord in Jimmy Carter when he was running the state of Georgia and, later, running for president. After Fallows signed on as a Carter speechwriter in the 1976 campaign, he recalls going through Carter's personal speech files and finding dozens of articles clipped from the Monthly, marked and underlined in the candidate's handwriting.

There was thus a time when Peters looked forward to Carter's inauguration as the moment when the gospel would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. But today Peters speaks of Carter with the hurt anger of a teacher whose prize pupil has run off to join the Merchant Marine.

"You've got to be willing to face the shame of being wrong," he says. "Carter doesn't face that—and it's going to kill him."

Influence on Government

Peters believes, nevertheless, that he has had an influence on the government. He has, beyond question, influenced the climate of American political journalism, as former Monthly staffers have gone on to high-visibility jobs with such publications as the New Yorker, Esquire, Harper's, the Atlantic, the New Republic, the Wall Street Journal and the Los Angeles Times.

Peters' plans for the future include a vague vision of a school of government that would teach gospel-oriented political science and not give out degrees. But for right now, he must find a new home for his magazine—the La Salle Building, at Connecticut Avenue and L streets NW, is slated for demolition later this year.

Wherever Peters goes, the disorganization, the dust and the aroma of genius will undoubtedly follow. With ironic-self knowledge, he has titled his monthly column "Tilting at Windmills." And like the real Don Quixote, he seems willing to stay with his quest as long as he has the strength.

Before joining the staff of The Washington Post Sunday Magazine, Garrett Epps was fiction editor of the Washington Monthly for six months.